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DOCUMENTS

1. *The Society of Dissenters founded at New York in 1769.*

HISTORIANS have long recognized more or less fully the importance of the controversies which, about the middle of the eighteenth century, prevailed between Anglicans and Dissenters in the colonies over the question of a colonial episcopate and other related subjects. The special conditions attending these discussions in New York have also been explained. It has been noticed that the discussion over the founding of King's College constituted one phase of the subject. The fact that, when the Revolution began, the Presbyterians of New York City had long but vainly been seeking a charter of incorporation for themselves as a religious society, has also been brought out. They denied the validity of the interpretation put by the officials on the act of 1693, to the effect that it established the Church of England in the four southern counties of the province. They also denied that the English Church was *de jure* established in all the colonies, and therefore that Dissenters were subject to all the regulations prescribed in the Act of Toleration. Presbyterians also sought to obtain for themselves the position of advantage secured for the sect in Scotland by the Act of Union. In April, 1769, and repeatedly thereafter, efforts were made to pass acts relieving Dissenters from the payment of taxes for the support of the clergy of a church to which they did not belong. But these efforts all failed because of the opposition of the Council; it would make no concession to the demand.

That, along with the Presbyterian clergymen of the city, William Livingston, John Morin Scott and Alexander McDougall were prominently connected with the movement, is also well known. The activity of Livingston as a pamphleteer and contributor to the newspapers in the Presbyterian interest, has been clearly described by his biographer and others. But hitherto writers have failed to understand how definite was the form taken by the Presbyterian movement, and what wide-reaching plans these bodies cherished for securing united action on the part of Dissenters generally throughout the colonies against British and Anglican claims. Had these plans been carried into execution, a religious character would have been given to the Revolution.

The document which is here printed shows the ultimate point reached by the Presbyterians as agitators and the plan of operations which they had formulated early in 1769. It was recently discovered among a mass of judicial records which are stored in the vaults of the Court House of New York County. It consists of minutes of various meetings held during the months of February and March, 1769, by leading members of the Presbyterian and Baptist churches of New York City, in which they organized themselves as a "Society of Dissenters." Their object was to protest and to enlarge their rights. It was intended that this society should be the parent of a federation of similar societies, and that these, like the political communities of the time, should be bound together by committees of correspondence. But beyond the issue of the circular letter printed here, the movement scarcely went. The minutes abruptly close with the entry for March 21, 1769. They occupy the early pages of a volume of ordinary ledger size, which in 1791 was filled with entries of writs by one of the clerks of the Supreme Court of the state.

A part of these minutes, viz., the Articles of Agreement and the Circular Letter, were printed in Gaine's *New York Gazette*, July 24, 1769. This was done by one of the Anglican opponents of the Dissenters. In the next number, that of July 31, appeared an unsigned letter (from a Presbyterian) avowing the Circular Letter and the Articles which had been printed, and declaring the intention to continue meetings and keep up the agitation against the establishment of bishops. A few other references to the matter appear in contemporary newspapers, but nothing of special consequence, save a circular letter published by Gaine, September 25, 1769, which was prepared in March, 1764, by certain Presbyterians of Pennsylvania for the purpose of bringing about closer union. These articles, however, make no express reference to Anglicans. Since Gaine's *Gazette* is so rare, and we apparently now have a correct copy of the minutes of all, or nearly all, the meetings that were held, it has been deemed advisable to print the minutes in full.

HERBERT L. OSGOOD.

NEW YORK, February 17th 1769.

Whereas it is of the utmost Importance for the different Christian Denominations in the Country, not belonging to the Church, professing themselves to be in Communion with the Church of England, to unite together for the preservation of their common and respective civil and religious Rights and Privileges, against all Oppressions and Encroachments by those of any Denomination whatsoever ; it is thought proper for

that purpose, to form a Society for taking Care of the said common and respective, Civil and Religious Rights and Privileges, of those of their Brethren in the Colony of New York, and the Neighboring Colonies, who do not profess to belong to the said Church, professing themselves to be in Communion with the Church of England: And for that purpose the following Persons voluntarily met together to wit.

Messrs. PETER VAN BRUGH LIVING-

STON

HENRY WILLIAMS

SAMUEL BROOME

THOMAS SMITH

ALEXANDER M^cDOUGALL

SAMUEL LOUDON

WILLIAM GOFORTH

JOSEPH HALLETT

JOHN MORIN SCOTT

WILLIAM LIVINGSTON

WILLIAM M^cKINLEY

ROBERT BOYD

FRANCIS VAN DYCKE

SAMUEL EDMONDS

JONATHAN BLAKE

WILLIAM NEILSON

JOHN BROOME and

JOHN M^cKESSON

The above named Gentlemen being so met together for the purpose aforesaid did unanimously elect Mr. Peter Van Brugh Livingston their Moderator for the present Meeting. And thereupon it was unanimously agreed,

1st That the Society do appoint a Secretary to make Entries of their Transactions who shall remain their Secretary for one year at least and that John M^cKesson be the Secretary of Society for the present year.

2^{dly} That fifteen members of the said Society shall form a Quorum to proceed on Business at any Meeting.

3^{dly} That for the present the said Society is not to exceed the Number of Sixty Persons in the whole.

4^{thly} That for the present this Society will receive as Members thereof from the Presbyterian Church in the City under the pastoral Charge of the Reverend Mr. Mason any number not exceeding five; From the Baptist Church in this City under the pastoral Charge Reverend Mr. any number not exceeding seven; and from the Presbyterian Church in this City under the pastoral Charge of the Reverend Messrs. Rodgers and Treat any Number not exceeding sixteen.

5^{thly} That it shall be in the power of a Majority of the Members now present belonging to the two presbyterian Churches and the Baptist Church to nominate such other persons belonging to their particular Churches to fill up their respective Numbers in the said Society as they shall think proper.

6^{thly} That this Society shall meet on the ——— Evening in every Week until they shall agree to meet seldomer: And that on every special Emergency the Secretary with the Leave of the Moderator shall be authorized to summon a special Meeting of the said Society at other times to be notified to one Member of this Society belonging to each Congregation.

7^{thly} That no Matters of Doctrine, Church Discipline, or Worship shall ever be the subject either of the Acts or Conversation of the said Society.

8^{thly} That the Society shall as their last Act at every Meeting chuse a Moderator for the next ensuing Meeting ; and that the Moderator for the Time being, immediately before such Election, shall fix the Hour and place for such Meeting.

9^{thly} That there shall be a standing Committee for Correspondence appointed who shall have it in Charge, to write to such proper persons not belonging to the Church professing themselves to be in Communion of the Church of England in the several Counties in this Colony, and the neighboring Colonies, as are of sufficient Influence for that purpose, to constitute as many Societies as may be thought proper to correspond with this Society, respecting such Matters as properly fall within the Design for which this Society is constituted. And that the said Committee of Correspondence, do from Time to Time lay before the Society such Letters as they shall write before they shall be sent, and also the Letters which they shall from Time to Time receive, which shall from Time to Time be filed [by] the Secretary of the Society.

10^{thly} That in every different part of the Country, whether in this or the Neighboring Colonies, where a like Society shall be established such Society shall be entitled to send a Delegate to the Meetings of this Society, who shall have an equal Voice with any other Member of this Society.

11^{thly} That at every Meeting of this Society the Proceedings of their last Meeting shall be read by their Secretary, immediately after the Moderator has taken the Chair ; and before the Society proceeds to any Business.

12^{thly} That for the Preservation of good Order, when any Member speaks on any Matter in this Society, he shall always address himself to the Moderator in the Chair. That no more than one Member shall speak at a Time ; and that no Member speak more than once to the same point on any particular Matter or Subject in debate.

13^{thly} That no Member shall speak on any Subject not properly within the Design of this Institution, whilst the Moderator is in the Chair.

14^{thly} That no Member shall depart from the said Society whilst the Moderator is in the Chair without his Leave.

It is ordered by the Moderator that this Society do meet at the House of David Phillipse in ——— Street in the North ward of this City at six of the Clock.

And lastly William Livingston Esq. is elected Moderator of this Society for the next ensuing Meeting.

At a Meeting of this Society according to Appointment of the Moderator at the House of David Phillipse on Tuesday the Twenty-first day of February 1769.

Present WILLIAM LIVINGSTON ESQUIRE Moderator.

Messrs. HENRY WILLIAMS	ROBERT BOYD
SAMUEL BROOME	FRANCIS VAN DYCK
PETER VAN BRUGH LIVINGSTON	WILLIAM M ^c KINLEY
ALEXANDER M ^c DOUGALL	WILLIAM GOFORTH
SAMUEL LOUDEN	SAMUEL EDMONDS
JOHN MORIN SCOTT	JOHN BROOME and
WILLIAM NEILSON	JOHN MCKESSON

According to the Eleventh general Rule of the Society the proceedings of the last Meeting were read.

A Majority of the Members of this Society who belong to the Presbyterian Church under the pastoral Charge of the Reverend Messrs. Rodgers and Treat being present to wit Mr. Moderator, Messrs. Peter Van Brugh Livingston, John Broome, John Morin Scott Alexander McDougall William Neilson Samuel Broome and John McKesson do nominate Messrs. David Van Horne and Peter R. Livingston two Gentlemen belonging to their particular Church and present them to this Society to be Members thereof and they are unanimously received accordingly.

All the Members of this Society who belong to the Baptist Church under the pastoral charge of the Revd. Mr. — being present to wit Messrs. Henry Williams, Samuel Edmonds Francis Van Dyck and William Goforth do nominate Messrs. John Stites, Isaac Skillman and William Lawson three Gentlemen belonging to their particular Church and present them to this Society to be members thereof and they are unanimously received accordingly; which Gentlemen compleat the Number of Members allotted to that Church by the fourth general Rule of this Society.

A Majority of the Members of this Society who belong to the presbyterian Church under the pastoral Charge of the Reverend Mr. Mason being present, to wit Messrs. Samuel Loudon Robert Boyd and William M^cKinley do nominate Mr. Alexander Robertson a Gentleman belonging to their particular Church and present him to this Society to be a Member thereof and he is unanimously received accordingly which Gentleman completes the Number of Members allotted to that Church by the fourth general Rule of this Society.

The Society Agree that nine of their Members be appointed a Committee for Correspondence to bring in a Draft or Drafts of Letter or Letters to be laid before this Society, as soon as the said Committee shall have such Draft or Drafts as they shall think proper prepared for that purpose; And that any Gentleman who is Moderator for the Time being by reason of the short duration of his Office may be appointed a Member of any Standing Committee; And that the said Committee for Correspondence shall be Elected by Ballot and shall be and remain a Standing Committee for one year.

The Society then proceeded to elect by Ballot nine of their Members to be a Standing Committee for Correspondencies whereupon the follow-

ing Gentlemen were duly elected to form the said Committee viz. Messrs. Peter Van Brugh Livingston Henry Williams, John Morin Scott, William Livingston, David Van Horne, Peter R. Livingston, Alexander McDougall, John Broome and Samuel Loudon.

Mr. Moderator appoints next Tuesday Evening at six of the Clock at this House of David Phillips to be the Time and place for the next Meeting of this Society.

And Lastly, Mr. Henry Williams is elected Moderator for the next ensuing Meeting of this Society.

At a Meeting of the Society pursuant to _____ of the Moderator at the House of David Phillips on Tuesday Evening the Twenty Eighth of February 1769.

Present Mr. HENRY WILLIAMS Moderator.

Messrs. THOMAS SMITH	ALEXANDER M ^c DOUGALL
DAVID VAN HORNE	ALEXANDER ROBERTSON
PETER V. B. LIVINGSTON	SAMUEL EDMONDS
SAMUEL LOUDON	JOHN STITES
W ^m GOFORTH	ISAAC SKILLMAN
SAMUEL BROOME	WILLIAM M ^c KINLEY
WILLIAM LIVINGSTON	JONATHAN BLAKE
FRANCIS VAN DYCKE	ROBERT BOYD and
PETER R. LIVINGSTON	JOHN MCKESSON

Pursuant to the Eleventh general Rule of the Society the Minutes of the last Preceding Meeting were read.

A Majority of the Members of this Society who belong to the Presbyterian Chh. under the pastoral Charge of the Reverend Messrs. Rodgers and Treat being present to wit Messrs. David Van Horne Peter Van Brugh Livingston Thomas Smith Samuel Broome William Livingston Peter R. Livingston Alexander McDougall and John McKesson do nominate Doctor Benjamin Y Prime a Gentleman belonging to their particular Church and present him to this Society to be a member thereof and he is unanimously received accordingly.

Mr. Moderator appoints next Monday Evening for the next meeting of this Society at this House of Mr. Phillips at six of the Clock in the Evening.

And lastly Mr. David Van Horne is elected Moderator for the next Meeting of this Society.

At a Meeting of the Society according to the Adjournment of the Moderator at the House of David Phillips on Monday the Sixth of March 1769.

Present Mr. DAVID VAN HORNE Moderator.

Messrs. HENRY WILLIAMS	WILLIAM LIVINGSTON
ALEXR. M ^c DOUGALL	PETER R. LIVINGSTON
WILLIAM NEILSON	ISAAC SKILLMAN
JOSEPH HOLLETT	WILLIAM GOFORTH

SAMUEL BROOME

PETER V. B. LIVINGSTON

BENJ. Y. PRIME

WILLIAM MCKINLEY

SAMUEL LOUDEN

JOHN M^cKESSON

ROBERT BOYD and

JOHN STITES

FRANCIS VAN DYCKE

ALEXANDER ROBERTSON

Pursuant to the Eleventh general Rule of the Society the Minutes of the last preceding Meeting were read.

The Committee of Correspondence reported to the Society a draft of a Letter to be sent to such Correspondents as the Society shall think proper which draft being corrected by the Society and finally approved of is in the words following to wit.

New York

As civil and religious Liberty is justly esteemed amongst the greatest of human Blessings, the loss of which must necessarily be attended with the most complicated misery, it cannot be doubted that its preservation merits our most vigorous Efforts. No man duly sensible of its inestimable Value, but will acknowledge it our indispensable Duty, by every lawful means to preserve it to ourselves and transmit it to Posterity.

The History of all ages furnishes abundant and melancholy proofs, that even the best of men (such is the pride and ambition of human nature) have too frequently abused an undue share of power; and that it is therefore an Argument of the Wisdom, as well as productive of the Happiness of a People, to preserve a just Ballance in the different branches of Government, both civil and religious: And though it is well known that most of our Colonies have hitherto held their privileges in tolerable security; Yet no one who is properly sensible of that important Blessing, can help being alarmed at the Attempts lately made by many of the Episcopal Clergy, and some of their Laity, to introduce Bishops into America. They have not only planned their Scheme, but have pursued it as far as our Watchfulness on this side the *Atlantic*, and the political jealousies on the other would permit. And as we have the utmost reason to fear, that they have not abandoned the project, we ought still to be on our Guard, lest our Inattention should facilitate its accomplishment. Should such be the Event, *how terrifying the prospect!* We should soon be obliged to bid farewell to that religious Liberty, in which CHRIST hath set us free; and instead of that divine Satisfaction which flows from the uninterrupted enjoyment of the Rights of private Judgment, and the Worship of God according to our Consciences, (for which some of our forefathers left their native Country; and took sanctuary in this then uncultivated Wilderness, from the oppression of *Ecclesiastical power*) the introduction of Episcopacy would immediately fill our Hearts with just forebodings of Evil. For it is much to be feared, that so extraordinary and dangerous an Innovation, would sooner or later be attended with

such Restraints, impositions and penalties on all Nonconformists as would make Life itself intolerable. The Non-Episcopalians have the greater reason to be alarmed at the Attempt to introduce Episcopacy, when they already see the members of that Church Pursuing measures for ingrossing an inordinate share of power; while themselves, tho ten to one in this Colony, are treated with open Contempt; and publicly told by the warm Advocates of prelacy, that they ought to be tributaries to the Church; nor be suffered to enjoy any post, either of honor, trust, or profit. Our fears are greatly increased, when we consider the Episcopal Church possessed of so immense an Estate in this City; and her members enjoying the Principal part of the wealth of the Metropolis: not that we envy either the Corporation of that Church, or any private member belonging to it, in any part of their Possessions: We only notice their superior riches, as an unfailing Source of Superior influence; an influence sufficient unless opposed by the union of all the other denominations to carry almost every Election here. By the policy of the Constitution, they are secure of the Countenance of the Crown, the Governor and the Council; and consequently of a preference respecting all Officers and favors in the Gift of the Government; while the only security left to their brethren of different persuasions, is to avail themselves of their numbers, and to preserve a Majority in the house of representatives. Of this preference we can need no other Proof, than the Liberality of the Government to them, in the Grant of large Tracts of Land in every new township, for a parsonage glebe, and for the Society for propagating the Gospel; while the churches of every other denomination are refused even the comparatively trifling favor of a Charter, to enable them to enjoy the benefit of private Donations. Of this the Episcopalians are fully sensible; and therefore, though it is evident that where [were] we wholly to engross the representative Body, and fill every Elective Office in the Colony, they by having a triple check upon us would be safe against all possible attempts by those of other persuasions; they are Nevertheless Strenuously Endeavoring to Obtain a Majority in those Elective Offices, in which our only security consists. These Considerations ought to teach those whom they term Dissenters, to make it a maxim of their Conduct, to be jealous of bestowing these Offices on Episcopalians, as thereby they evidently weaken the Grand Bulwark of their Liberty.

These reasons have induced a number of Gentlemen of different denominations to meet, and form themselves into a Society, for the preservation of their common Liberty. We do by no means propose to Act Offensively against the Episcopalians, but barely to Counteract them, as far as we shall discover them pursuing designs unfriendly to our General interest. We can with Great Truth and Sincerity declare, that we would not, if it were in our power, deprive that Church of any Enjoyment save only that of Applying our property to her Support, which she does in four Counties in this province; and has in one of them Attempted to Enlarge her establishment: And we have but too much reason to suspect from her

unwearied pains and struggles for Power, that it is with a View to Obtain an Ascendancy in the House of representatives, sufficient to enable her to make such establishment General through the province; or to some other designs unfavorable to those of different persuasions. Why else is she not satisfied with her Already disproportionate degree of power before mentioned? We only desire ourselves to enjoy and to transmit to our posterity the right of private Judgment; and of Worshipping God according to the dictates of our own Consciences. For this important purpose, and to Strengthen our interest, we propose to Write to all our brethren on the Continent, to exhort them to form themselves into such Societies, to Correspond with each other on these Interesting concerns; and thereby endeavour the preservation of our Common Liberty.

We therefore earnestly intreat you, as you regard the religious liberty of the present and future Generations, to communicate this letter, to some of the leading members of your Congregation; to use your interest and urge them to use theirs to get as many leading men of the various Non-episcopal Denominations among you as they shall think proper, to erect a similar society, or societies. Let us therefore, Notwithstanding our peculiar religious distinctions, heartily unite for our common Safety.

We who reside in this City and are thereby under superior Advantages of intelligence, will be as Vigilant as possible, in discovering any measures that may be pursued Detrimental to our Liberty; and give you such information as we shall conceive Subservient to our common cause. We also propose to correspond with our Brethren in Scotland and Ireland, and with the Standing Committee of Dissenters in England, to engage them to favour the design. The latter may have it in their power to do us singular service.

As soon as your Societies are Instituted, we shall be glad to be informed of it, and have the names of their members transmitted to us with directions how to direct to them. Their Letters to us may be directed to _____ Esq. in New York, and sent to us by some safe private hand to save postage, Except on Extraordinary Occasions. We enclose you a Copy of the Articles on which our Society is founded with the names of the members, that you may form yours on the like plan. We would only mention, that the sooner your Societies are formed the sooner we shall be enabled to open our Correspondence, and begin to experience the Salutory effects expected from their institution. We shall from time to time open to them the particular instances in which they may be more peculiarly Serviceable to the Common interest. We Cannot conclude without recommending it to the members of the Societies, to make it a matter of their prayer, that God would bless the design so far as it may tend to promote his Glory and the Good of his people.

We are, with esteem,

P. S. We would inform you that a number of us have lately had reprinted a small treatise written more [than] one hundred years ago, by Thomas Delaune entitled, A plea for the Nonconformists; sold by Gar-

rat Noel Bookseller in New York at the small price of 1s. 6d. in which the reasons and Grounds of our nonconformity are fully, clearly, and we think unanswerably stated ; and we would recommend it to your society to get a number of them to lend to their Neighbors and Acquaintance, and thereby make them as diffusively useful as possible ; as we think they will have a Good Tendency to Ground and fix them in their principles.

Ordered that a Number of Copies of the said Letter be engrossed before the next Meeting of the Society.

Mr. Moderator appoints Tuesday the 21st Instant for the next meeting of this Society at this House of David Phillips at six of the Clock in the evening.

And Lastly Mr. Peter R. Livingston is elected Moderator for the next Meeting of this Society.

At a meeting of the Society according to appointment of the Moderator at the House of David Phillips the 21st March 1769.

Present PETER R. LIVINGSTON Moderator.

Messrs. SAMUEL LOUDON	WILLIAM LIVINGSTON
ALEXANDER M ^c DOUGALL	JOHN BROOME
PETER V. B. LIVINGSTON	BENJAMIN Y. PRIME
HENRY WILLIAMS	ALEXANDER ROBERTSON
SAMUEL BROOME	JOSEPH HOLLETT

WILLIAM GOFORTH

JONATHAN BLAKE

WILLIAM M^cKINLEY and

JOHN M^cKESSON

Pursuant to the 11th general Rule the Minutes of the last preceding Meeting were read.

A Majority of the Members of this Society who belong to the Presbyterian Church under the pastoral charge of the Revd. Messrs. Rodgers and Treat being present to wit Mr. Moderator Messrs. Peter V. B. Livingston Samuel Broome William Livingston John Broome, Benjamin Y. Prime, Joseph Hollett Alexander McDougall and John McKesson do nominate Doctor Malachi Treat a Gentleman belonging to their particular Church and present him to this Society to be a Member thereof and he is unanimously received accordingly.

Messrs. William McKinley and John Broome introduce Alexander Lime Esq. of Sommerset County in New Jersey as a visiting Friend. The Society receives him accordingly and thanks him for his attendance.

Several Copies of the circular Letter of Correspondence being engrossed and signed brought into the Society were corrected, but there not being a Sufficient Number *ordered* that Committee of Correspondence do meet here on next Tuesday afternoon at three of the Clock to correct such other engrossed Copies of the said Letter and of the plan of this Society as shall then be ready.

Mr. Moderator appoints next Tuesday Evening for the next meeting of this Society at this House of David Phillips at six of the Clock.

And Lastly Doctor Benj. Y. Prime is unanimously elected Moderator for the next Meeting of this Society.